

“Basic Training”
Isaiah 6: 1-8/ II Timothy 2: 1-19
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The “emphasis” in this “season of **Lent**”: it is that of “Christian **discipline**.” Hence, the “title” of **today’s** sermon: “Basic Training.”

“Discipline”--**Disciple**? Think about it. “Authentic Christian living” consists of “five essential disciplines”: prayer, worship, Bible study, tithing, and service. Let’s “look,” briefly, at “**each** of these.”

1. In a “popular book” (in the 1960’s), entitled Are You Running With Me, Jesus?, the iconoclastic Episcopal priest, **Malcolm Boyd**, said: “**Prayer isn’t** as much talking **to** God, as it is **sharing** God’s **presence**.” I might say: “**Celebrating** God’s presence.” Since **that** is “Who God **is**” (at least when you “read the Bible”): that “transcendent, gracious, personal Presence, in whom **all** of life **rests**”--indeed, “**our** lives.”

“Prayer”--as “awareness”--an “attitude” of “gratitude”? That **is**, at least, “**one** kind of praying”: that of “praise” and “thanksgiving.” The “**other** two” being: “confession” and “repentance” (“God, be **merciful** to me, a **sinner**”; and “**Forgive** us, we **pray**”), as well as “**intercessory** praying.” That’s when we’re “**asking** whatever **of** God.” Whether it’s for our “daily **bread**” (to quote **Jesus**); for the “healing” of **whomever** (or **whatever**); or when “seeking” to “**know** God’s **will**” **in** and **for** our **lives** (when it comes to “making **decisions**”).

“Praying,” as “praise” and “thanksgiving”; as “confession” and “repentance”; as “intercession”: this “primary discipline” of “**Christian living**”--**prayer**--at least “according to **Jesus**.” As in the “insert” in “today’s **bulletin**,” for instance, where I have printed “thirteen different occasions” (in the “Gospel of Luke” **alone**) where “**Jesus** is praying.”

In this “season of **Lent**” (for **many**, a time of **intensified** “**Christian devotion**”)--you **might** want to “spend some time” **reading** (in “the **Bible**”) these “references” to **Jesus’** “prayer life.” For **indeed**, if “being a **Christian**” **is**, afterall, being “**conformed** to the image of **Christ**” (Romans 8: 29)--do we (**as** Christians); do we need “any **other** reason” for the “priority of **praying**” (in “**our** lives”)--than the “profound realization” that “**Jesus’** life,” at least; that “our **Lord’s** life” **was**, in fact, “**bathed in prayer**.”

2. A “**second** Christian discipline”--**inseparable**, as it is, **from** “praying”--is that of “worship.” In **fact**, as “**controversial**-a-subject” as one “can find,” **among** Christians, **today**--the **question**--what **is** “worship”? Is it “entertainment”? That **seems to be** a matter of some “confusion” (in “the world” of “**popular** Christianity”) **these days**.

Which is why our “**Old Testament lesson**” today **is** what **the Bible** says

“worship” is--at least “for **Christians**”--as “**un-entertaining**” as it may be. In **other words**, we don’t just “make it up”--we don’t just “**copy** what we see” **on television** (or at a “rock concert”)--what we “think **worship** is” (as “individuals” **or** as a “congregation”).

Did you **notice**--the “four **movements**” in this “description” (in “the Bible”)--this “definition” of “worship”? The “first” is “praise” (“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory”). The “**second** movement” involves “confession” and “repentance” (“**Woe** is **me**, for I am **lost**; I am **unclean**, and I dwell in the midst of such un-cleanliness”). The “**third** movement” is one of “redemption,” of “healing” and “cleansing,” of “being made whole” (“Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven”).

In **our** “service of worship”--in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)--this expression of “mercy” and “forgiveness,” this “word of **grace**”: it is “represented,” most **dramatically**, in our “observance” of “the Lord’s **Supper**.” Where we are “claimed” and “called” to “commune” **with** “the living **Christ**” (Jesus, our **Savior**); where we are “empowered” by **his** “presence” **within** and **among** us. **Not** because **any** of us--because we have “**earned** our way” to “this table”--because (on “the strength” of “**our** virtue”) we “**deserve**” to “break this bread” and “drink of this cup.” It **is**, rather, because we are “loved” just that “**un-conditionally**” **by God** (Father, Son, **and** Holy Spirit) whom we know “most” and “best” (in the “most human” of ways) **in** the “person” and “presence” of **Jesus** (our **Savior**, our **Lord**).

Just as our “**observing** communion” **every** Sunday (each “Lord’s Day”)--**again**, this is **not** something “we do” (as Christians)--**merely** because we “think it’s a **good idea**” (because we “saw it **on television**,” or “**read** about it,” somewhere, in the “**print** media”). **Rather**, in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we “observe communion” **every Sunday** because (in the “Book of Acts”) we’re told that this is how “Christians,” at least; how “Christians” have “**always** worshipped.” Or as **Luke** writes (of those “**first** Christians”): “On the first day of the week, when we were **gathered together** to **break bread** (Acts 20: 7) Paul talked [**with us, about the Christian faith**].”

In **fact**, we’re told, he “talked all night”; such that **one** young man (named **Eutychus**)--who was sitting in an “upstairs window” (where “the worship service” was **being held**)--he “fell asleep,” falling **out of** the window, **landing** “three stories **below**” (the Bible says). **Everyone** thought he was **dead**. Except **Paul** (whose “sermon” had been “interrupted”)--Paul “went **downstairs**,” we’re told, and “recusitated” the young man--and then “he went back **upstairs**” to “**continue** talking” **some more** (the **Greek** word, there: it isn’t, actually, the word for “preaching”; it is, **instead**, “dialogue”).

And **you** think **I’m** “long-winded.” **Acts 20, verse 12** says that (the folk **at** this “worship service”), that they were “not a little comforted.” **Meaning**, of course, that they were “**greatly** comforted.” Which is what “**I** am”--“**greatly** comforted”--when I realize that nearly everything “wrong” about **me**: that there were those who “thought the **same** thing” about **Paul**. That even “**Paul’s** preaching” could put **some people** “to sleep”!

“On the **first day of the week**, when we were **gathered together to break bread**” Put **simply**, “**Christian worship**”--not **unlike**, what it means to **be** “a Christian”--it **isn’t** “singing a solo.” It **is**, rather, being “a part” **of** “Christ’s **body**” (the **church**); which “gathers **together**” **every Sunday** to “worship” (on “**this day**”; **not** just “**any day**”; but “the day” when “our **Lord**”; when he was “resurrected,” **by** “the **power of love**, who is **God**”; **resurrected**, from “death,” back to “life”). It’s why **we Christians** “worship” (even **today**); why we “worship **together**” on **Sunday** (the “**Lord’s Day**”). This “essential discipline” **of** “Christian living”--**think** about it--it is **not**, merely, an “option” (at least when you “read **the Bible**”; at least for “a **Christian**”).

3. Which brings us to the **next** “Christian discipline”: **Bible study**. And yes--I know--there **are** those who claim, that in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), that there is **no** “authority” when it comes to “studying the Bible.” That **anyone’s** “opinion” is just as “good” as anyone **else’s**; what someone has called “group-grope” (this is what “**I** think it means; what do **you** think?”). As **in**, for instance, “what you find on **the Internet**”--where you can “find **anything** about **everything**”--even “the Bible.”

That is **not**, however, what “the Bible” **itself** “declares. In **Acts 2**, for example, which describes the “**first Christian converts**” **devoting themselves to** “the apostle’s **teaching**” (Acts 2: 42). [The “apostles” **were** those who “**knew Jesus**” **before and after** his “death and resurrection.”] Or in **I Corinthians 15**, where “**Paul** explains” that even **he** was “**taught** the Christian faith” **by** those same “apostles.”

In fact, within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) **itself**--as “liberal” as we are “considered,” by **some**, to **be** (“a church” where **anyone** can “believe **anything**”)--when one studies the “history” and “tradition” that has “formed **our church**” (and **believe me**; for “the past 14 years” I have “read **everything**” I can “get **my hands** on,” and talked to as many “**informed Disciples**” as I “can **find**,” to try to “understand” who “we **Disciples**” are “called” and “meant” **to be**); indeed, within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) **itself**, there is a “tradition” **of** “**how to study the Bible**” that “goes back” (to at least **1835**) to Alexander **Campbell’s** book, Christianity Restored, in which he “defines” a “**Disciples’ way**” **of** “studying the Bible.”

It is, indeed, **to** “this tradition” of--yes, “faithful” and “prayerful”--but **also** “scholarly, learned, **intelligent Bible study**”; it is to this distinctly “**Disciples** tradition” of “how to study the Bible” that **I**, at least, am “**morally bound**” (as your “teaching pastor,” according to **Ephesians 4**). **Otherwise**, both **you and I**--we are being “un-ethical,” in “**claiming to be Disciples**,” if **how** we “study the Bible” is “compromised,” in **any way**, that makes it, **somehow**, “easier, less rigorous, less demanding, less challenging.”

Which **is**, of course, the “caricature” of “**popular Christianity**” in our “**consumer-driven culture**,” here “in America,” **today**. What has been called “Christianity **Lite**”; a “fast-food faith”; the “Reader’s Digest version”; the “moral and spiritual equivalent” of a “diet” of “pizza, Pepsi and potato chips.” As “popular” and “successful,” as “appealing” and “user-friendly” as it **may be**, however--if not every bit as “shallow”--it is **anything but** how the most “faithful **Disciples**,” at least, have “studied the Bible” throughout “**our**

church's **history**."

4. The "fourth" of these "Christian disciplines" is "tithing." It is the "standard" (in "the Bible") **for** Christian "giving" (**materially**). It means that "one-tenth" of our "material blessings" goes back **to God**. Which **also means** that "tithing" **isn't** "tipping"--it **isn't** an "afterthought." Rather, for "a **Christian**," the "**tithe** comes off **the top**"; what the Bible calls "the **first** fruits." **And**, it is considered a "blessing," a "privilege," an act of "worship"--**tithing**--at least for "a Christian."

Unfortunately--most people "don't like it" when preachers "talk **about** tithing." Eventhough **Jesus** "talked about it" **more** than "anything **else**"; in **fact**, in even more "**extravagant** ways," in which "tithing" is merely the "**minimum** standard" **for** "Christian **giving**." According to **Jesus**, at least (**Matthew 6: 21**), the "measure" of **anyone's** "moral and spiritual **condition**"--and certainly, that of "a **Christian**"--it is to be "found," **finally**, in **how** and **where**, and on **what** we "spend our **money**" ["For where your **treasure** is, there will your heart be **also**"] (?).

I, however: I am more of a "**people-pleaser**" than **Jesus** seems to have been. Unlike **Jesus**, I "**don't** like" to "say" or "**do** things" that "**others** find **upsetting**." So I **won't** "say **anymore**," today, **about** "tithing." Except to "offer" this **interesting** "statistic."

One of the "Five Pillars" of **Islam** is called "Zakat"; the "requirement" that **Muslims** give "2 to 3 per cent" **of** their "material wealth" to various **Muslim** "ministry" and "**mission** efforts." Which--according to "**several** studies"--is about the **same** "percentage of giving" (on the part of "Disciples") **throughout** the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) **as** a "denomination."

5. The "last" of these "essential Christian disciplines" is "service"--both **in** and **thru** "the church." Whether it's "singing in the choir," or "working in a homeless shelter"; be it "teaching Sunday School," serving as an "lay-**elder**" or "deacon," managing "the church's **finances**" and "caring for its **property**," sponsoring a "youth group," visiting "shut-ins"--or (**outside** "the church"; on **behalf of** "the church")--"tutoring" in an "after-**school** program," teaching **English** to **immigrants**, working on a "Habitat for **Humanity**" house, or participating in a "Mission to **Andros**" (the "Bible School" the **Conrads** "work in" each summer). For **some**--like **Chaplain Tolbert**, the **Garlicks**, and **Joel Silver**, for example (here in "**our** congregation")--it may even mean a "**vocational** calling," to the kind of rigorous "study and preparation" involved in **offering** such "service," in being "**ordained** to" [what in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is called "The **Order of Ministry**"].

When it comes to "**Christian** disciplines," at least, there **is no** "prayer" or "worship" or "Bible study" or "tithing" that doesn't **lead also** to "service" (**Christian** service; in "**Christ's** name," for "**his** sake"). **Just as**--at least for "a **Christian**"--there is no "service" without "prayer" and "worship," "Bible study" and "tithing."

As in that **last** “act of worship” in Isaiah 6: “And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I **send**, and who will go **for** us?’ And **I said**: ‘Here am **I**--send **me**.’” (Did you think I’d “**forgotten** it”?)

And yet--“Christian **discipline**”--it’s **not** “so **simple**.” As **these two** “illustrations” **suggest**. One comes from **T.S. Eliot’s** remarkable **play**, “Murder in the Cathedral.” Where **Thomas Beckett** (the “Archbishop of Canterbury”)--he is about to “**die** for his **faith**”--and he “speaks” these **haunting lines**: “The last temptation is the greatest treason--to do the **right deed**--for the **wrong reason**.”

In **other words**: do **we**--as **Christians**--do we “pray” and “worship”; do we “study the Bible, tithe, and serve” because we “**are** Christians”? Or do we “**practice** these disciplines” in order to “**be** Christians”?

As in the “**just** as “haunting-a-lines,” which “the lawyer,” **Frank Galvin**, speaks in the **the film**, “The Verdict.” **Galvin** (a “deeply **flawed** man,” a “deteriorating **alcoholic**,” played by **Paul Newman**)--in “this scene,” he is giving his “**summation** to the **jury**.” The “case” has involved a “lawsuit” which Galvin has “filed” **against** a “Roman Catholic **hospital**”; in fact, a case that has revealed such “tragic corruption” on the part of “the hospital” (**and** “the church” it **represents**). Speaking to “the jury,” Galvin--**himself** “a Catholic”--he says: “**My** faith teaches, that when we **act** in faith, faith **will be** given to us.”

Which “**reminds** me” of something I once heard (the late) **Scott Peck** say. Speaking at “The **Citadel**,” here in **Charleston** (some **years** ago); he said a man had recently said **to** him: “I’ve been going to AA--but it’s **not working**.”

“How long have you been **going**?” Peck asked.

“Oh, about **six-months**,” the man replied.

At which Dr. Peck (the “Christian **psychiatrist**”)--**he** said--“Try **twenty years**!”

The “disciplines” of “Christian living”--prayer, worship, Bible study, tithing, and service.

In this “Lenten season”--it’s something to “**think** about.” On the **one hand**: “The last temptation **is** the greatest treason--to do the **right deed**--for the **wrong reason**.”

While at the **same time**: “When we **act** in faith--faith **will be** given to us.”

Being “a **Christian**”--what do “**you** think”--is it “some of **both**” (?).